



January 6, 2020

Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council  
 Attention: FPL 3a Comments  
 500 Poydras Street  
 Suite 1117  
 New Orleans, LA 70130

Dear RESTORE Council members,

The undersigned groups appreciate the opportunity to share our supporting comments on the Mississippi River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp Project, submitted by the State of Louisiana for RESTORE Council consideration for the Funded Priorities List 3a of the RESTORE Pot 2 Council-selected projects.

We represent a coalition of conservation interests that have worked for decades to restore a healthy Gulf of Mexico ecosystem—starting with prompt restoration of the Mississippi River Delta—reconnecting the Mississippi River to its delta to protect communities, environment, and economies. Our groups continue to recommend urgent action on projects that will reduce land loss and restore wetlands in the Mississippi River Delta through comprehensive restoration actions that have the potential to provide multiple benefits and services over the long term to the entire Gulf of Mexico.

The Mississippi River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp has long been discussed as an important coastal restoration project: it was featured as a key restoration project in the 1998 “Coast 2050” plan, was further developed in the Coastal Wetlands Planning Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) program with EPA as its sponsor, was included in the Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA) Study (WRDA 2007) and the previous three Louisiana Coastal Master Plans (2007, 2012 and 2017). We believe that this project is aligned with RESTORE Council goals and objectives, and the state’s proposal clearly articulates how the project meets three of the four priority criteria. As the external science reviewers said “the project has clearly defined goals

and objectives, measures of success aligning with the primary project goals are identified, and the methods for the proposed project are clearly defined with appropriate justification.” We commend the state for submitting such a strong and thorough proposal.

This diversion, planned near Angelina, will provide sediment and fresh, oxygenated water to existing wetlands in East Maurepas swamp. Dominated by bald cypress and water tupelo trees, the Maurepas swamp complex is one of the largest forested wetlands in the nation. However, levees constructed along the river have isolated the area from spring floods and the vital fresh water, nutrients and sediment they bring. This isolation, coupled with rising salinities throughout the Pontchartrain Basin while the MRGO was open, has left the swamp in a state of rapid decline – trees are dying, and young trees are not growing to replace them. The River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp project will benefit 45,000+ acres of swamp by reconnecting it with the river, aiding the prevention of further wetland loss and the conversion of swamps to marshes, as well as helping to offset future increases in salinity throughout the western Pontchartrain Basin. The fine grain sediment may also increase elevation to a point where there are periods without inundation so that seeds can germinate, perpetuating the forest into the future.

Swamps provide many benefits, including reducing storm surge from hurricanes and flooding and stifling erosion, as well as incredible habitat for birds and other wildlife. Our swamps also help make Louisiana the “Sportsman’s Paradise,” providing incredible ecotourism opportunities from kayaking to birding to fishing and hunting. One study estimates that more than 2 million people visit Louisiana annually to hunt, fish or see wildlife.

Additionally, this project will complement other nearby diversions being planned, including the Union and Manchac Landbridge diversions. Together, these diversions maintain important swamp and coastal habitats that help protect many communities in the region, including Baton Rouge. These projects will help maintain the Manchac Landbridge, a narrow strip of land between Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas, which will prevent the two lakes from merging, a situation that would be devastating and could send storm surge to communities from the River Parishes into the Greater Baton Rouge area.

Finally, the Mississippi River Reintroduction into Maurepas Swamp project would be directly adjacent to the United States Army Corps of Engineers’ West Shore Lake Pontchartrain levee project. We believe that the long term ecosystem benefits of this project would provide mitigation for bottomland hardwood and swamp habitat that is lost through the construction of the West Shore Lake Pontchartrain project. We have encouraged the Army Corps to consider using the Maurepas project as mitigation for the loss of bottomland hardwood habitat that will occur through the construction of the levee. Additionally, it is critical that RESTORE funds are provided to the State as quickly as possible for the State to take advantage of design and construction efficiencies that can be obtained by planning and designing these two projects in sync.

Due to the urgency of getting this project constructed and operating, the below signatories commend Louisiana’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority for submitting this project

for consideration in FPL 3a, and we urge the RESTORE Council to select this project and provide the full \$130 million of funding needed.

Sincerely,

Audubon Louisiana

America's WETLAND Foundation

Coalition for Coastal Resilience and Economy

Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana

Environmental Defense Fund

Greater New Orleans, Inc.

Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation

Land Trust for Louisiana

National Audubon Society

National Wildlife Federation

Restore or Retreat

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

The Nature Conservancy Louisiana